

Smokey will fly again!

by Dave Bervin

On October 10th, 2004, the Smokey Bear Balloon was driven into a 670-foot tower by an unexpected crosswind that blew the pilot's hat off. Due to the experience, abilities, and calm under pressure of the pilot (and some luck), all three passengers were able to climb down the tower safely to meet emergency responders and their family and friends anxiously waiting for them on the ground. The balloon is almost a total loss. The balloon and the basket will have to be replaced, but some of the other parts can be used again. This tragic event was reported worldwide. One might think that an event such as this would dampen the spirits of the crew, making them wonder if they could continue to spread the word of fire prevention and conservation in this way again. However, after everyone had arrived back at the balloon field and the two new passengers were 'christened' for their brave first flight, the crew waited for the pilot's words with baited breath. "As far as I'm concerned, this isn't the end", he said, to a hearty cheer from the crew. "I'll take the first ride!" was the loud reply from one of the senior crew members, which drew another cheer. The job now was to formulate a strategy to make this happen. On October 16th, the Friends of Smokey Bear Balloon had a regularly scheduled board meeting that was very well attended. At that meeting, friends and well-wishers expressed their feelings for each

other and the mission of Smokey Bear and its importance. At times, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. During that meeting, one thing became very obvious. The mission of the Smokey Bear Balloon is still relevant and important and will continue as strongly as it ever has. Some funding has already been donated, but there is a long way to go to the \$90,000 needed. However, if you think about it, that is just a drop in the bucket compared to the millions of dollars spent each year battling raging wildland fires. If the education and excitement created by this prevention tool prevents just one catastrophic fire, it is a very worthy investment. The last balloon was eleven years old with some good time left on it. When you look at it over time, it is a program with a huge return. With as many people that hold Smokey near and dear to their heart, it should not be difficult to raise the money needed. School children have donated their pennies knowing how important and possible this goal is. **One hundred percent** of your contribution, however small, is another step closer to seeing Smokey in the sky again. Please send your tax deductible donation to:
FRIENDS OF THE SMOKEY BEAR BALLOON, INC.
5912 Jones Pl.,
NW Albuquerque, NM 87120
An acknowledged receipt bearing the Friends of the Smokey Bear Balloon's IRS tax number will be promptly send. If you would like any additional information, please call Byrdie Walters @ 505-881-4426.





Will Smokey Fly Again?

By Frank Winer

On the way home from vacation in Santa Fe we stopped in Albuquerque for the hot air balloon festival. We were fortunate to be able to tie in with the Smokey Bear balloon folks as crew members, which allowed us to ride into the festival grounds in the 1949 La France fire engine that serves as a chase truck. We met Carolyn and Adam Ramos there and enjoyed Wednesday and Thursday, October 6 and 7, together with the Smokey Bear balloon and all the enthusiastic helpers. One of the features of the festival was the launch of “shape”

balloons on Thursday. Believe me, Smokey held his own among all the fancy shaped balloons! We arrived at home on Saturday evening and on Sunday morning were given the bad news of the balloon’s accident. For those of you who aren’t aware of the details, a gust of wind caught the balloon on Sunday morning as it was preparing to land, and blew it into a radio transmission tower before the pilot could gain enough altitude to clear it. The balloon was torn to shreds, but thankfully, the pilot and two young boys who were passengers, made their way down the tower uninjured.

The Smokey Bear balloon is a great asset, and a strong ally of the HFTCA, in keeping the image and fire prevention message of Smokey

before the public. They appear at schools and public functions, and Smokey Bear himself (through the cooperation of the local National Forest) usually appears wherever the balloon does. The kids and their parents love it! A number of us HFTCA members have become friendly with the volunteer organization, Friends of Smokey Bear Balloon (FSBB), that operates the balloons, and followed the balloon to various balloon festivals. In addition to the hot air balloon, FSBB also takes several cold air balloons to various functions around the country. Those of you who have been to our conventions in Capitan and Reno have seen them there.

After some deliberation, the directors of FSBB have decided to do their best to replace the hot air bal-

loon. Since the balloon itself was not insured (only the people were), they will have to depend on donations, grants, etc. to raise the funds for a replacement, which will cost about \$100,000.

The Hot Foot Teddy Collector's Association plans to send a donation to the Friends of Smokey Bear Balloon, to show our support when they so badly need it. Deanne and I would like to urge all of you who read this to also send a donation, large or small, to FSBB. The FSBB is a non-profit organization and all donations are tax deductible. Donations should be sent to: Friends of Smokey Bear Balloon Inc., 5912 Jones Place NW, Albuquerque, NM. 87120. A receipt bearing FSBB's IRS tax number will be promptly sent to all donors. More information is available on their web site: www.smokeybearballoon.com.

We have personally known the pilot, Bill Chapel, for a number of years, through Frank's and Bill's U.S. Forest Service careers. We have also known the crew chief, Dallas Griner, and his wife Carol, for several years. We really appreciate their dedication to Smokey and the fire prevention message. We'd really be proud of our HFTCA members to know that we've all done something to help get that balloon flying again!

KVOA News Report

Ten-year-old Tucsonan Aaron Whitacre had to climb down 700 feet before he was safely on the ground after his hot air balloon crashed into a radio tower Sunday.

It was a scary and shocking sight for hundreds of Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta spectators when the Smokey Bear balloon became trapped atop a radio tower and with two kids on board.

"You think you are strong till you know your kids are in jeopardy," said Mike Whitacre, Arron's father.

Aaron's mom, Jeanette Whitacre says, "I was just running down the street, trying to get to the accident site and praying he was okay."

The basket remained upright and close enough to the tower to climb down, but the ground was nearly 700 feet below.

"I mean, my left foot wouldn't stop shaking on me. Every time I'd put it down it would shake," Aaron said.

Another passenger, Troy Wells, explained, "When the basket snagged onto there, it was moving back and forth. I thought the tower was tipping. I was freaking out."

All three passengers made it down uninjured.

Scott Wells, Troy's father, said, "We're glad he's okay..(long emotional pause).....he'll fly again."

As for Smokey, he too is down tonight, but in pieces.

"I'm usually careful. I know, but today we'll make the exception," said Smokey Bear balloon pilot Bill Chapel. "It's destroyed; totally destroyed."

Crews had to climb back up to remove what was left, but the pilot says he believes Smokey will return to the skies.

Chapel added, "The crew says yes, so that's a pretty good start."

As for another balloon trip for the boys?

Aaron says, "A couple years away, probably, but this year? No."

Tucson boy survives balloon crash

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
10/11/2004

ALBUQUERQUE - A balloon became entangled in a radio tower on the final day of this city's trademark balloon festival Sunday, forcing the pilot and two young passengers, including one from Tucson, to climb most of the way down the nearly 700-foot-tall structure.

Bill Chapel was piloting the balloon - shaped like the face of *Smokey Bear* - when it blew into the radio tower near a park where the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta was being held.

"All you can do is grit your teeth and hold on to your passengers and prepare them for the impact," he said.

The hot-air balloon's canopy got wrapped up around the triangular-shaped tower, leaving its gondola resting up against the structure.

Chapel, 69, and passengers Aaron Whitacre, 10, of Tucson, and Troy Wells, 14, then began the long climb down the tower's ladder.

"I hung onto the tower with all my strength, and I got them calmed down," Chapel said. He added that



he didn't need to tell the boys what to do: "They climbed down the tower and I followed them."

Aaron was at the festival with his parents, Mike and Jeanette Whitacre. The Whitacres are balloon chasers - helping crews set up and launch balloons and then meeting them when they land - and volunteered at the Albuquerque event.

"The balloon was fun at the very beginning - but bad at the very end," said Aaron. "It was very scary."

"I just heard the pilot scream and he turned around and yelled 'hang on,'" he said. "I grabbed onto the gondola and we just climbed out and started going down the tower."

KKOB-AM shut down its 50,000-

watt transmitter and emergency crews gathered at the base of the tower, said Kathie Leyendecker, festival spokeswoman.

About 100 feet above the ground, workers met the three, secured them with safety gear, and helped them into a utility truck bucket.

Leyendecker said tower maintenance crews arrived to get the balloon down.

The Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board were investigating the incident.

The festival, which started in 1972, draws hundreds of balloons every October. Organizers say it has become the largest such festival in the world.

Fiesta October 2-10, 2004

by Carol Griner

On the first day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, a beautiful sky and a perfect day for flying.

On the second day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, fantastic weather and an amazing array of colorful balloons to play among.

On the third day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, iffy skies and a cancelled flight.

On the fourth day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, the same sad duplicate story as the previous day.

On the fifth day of Fiesta, Smokey

gave to me, delays because of the weather, but we flew and enjoyed the day.

On the sixth day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, a magnificent flying day with the Red Hat Society joining us. We flew a short flight south of the field to the gavel pit, but, wow, the special shapes were spectacular.

On the seventh day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, a sky full of stars, but when we arrived on the field, the winds started in. We were on delay for a couple of hours, but in the end, the flying was at pilot's discretion, so since Smokey doesn't take to high winds, our pilot decided not to fly.

On the eighth day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, a sky again full of stars and calm winds. We know the day wasn't going to be first-rate when the ice chest fell off the chase truck and we lost not only ice, but a couple of beers!!! The inflation wasn't the best because of twisted temperature lines, so Smokey had to deflate and the process of inflation started over. The flight was pleasant, but the landing spot was a little out of the ordinary. Smokey landed in an inaccessible spot and we had a heck of a time retrieving him. We had to take out tanks and load Smokey over a barbed wire fence, but, as experienced and knowledgeable as the Smokey crew is, it was no trouble getting Smokey into his protected space in the bed of the recovery truck. Bill promised not to land in that spot again.

On the ninth day of Fiesta, Smokey gave to me, a broken heart. The day started out ideally but ended in tragedy when

Smokey picked up winds after an hour's flight and was caught on a 670-foot radio tower. Bill and his two young passengers, Troy and Aaron, escaped injury as they climbed down the tower, but Smokey wasn't so lucky and was cut to shreds and just hung on the tower. Bill asked the crew if they liked this landing spot any better!!!

We were happy that Bill still had his sense of humor and we then knew he would fly again. Smokey started his mission on the first day of Fiesta 1993 and ended his mission on the last day of Fiesta 2004.

We are proud of his great career of eleven years for spreading the message toward fire prevention, and stay tuned for fund raisers to create Smokey II.



WELCOME - SMOKEY BEAR BALLOON II

